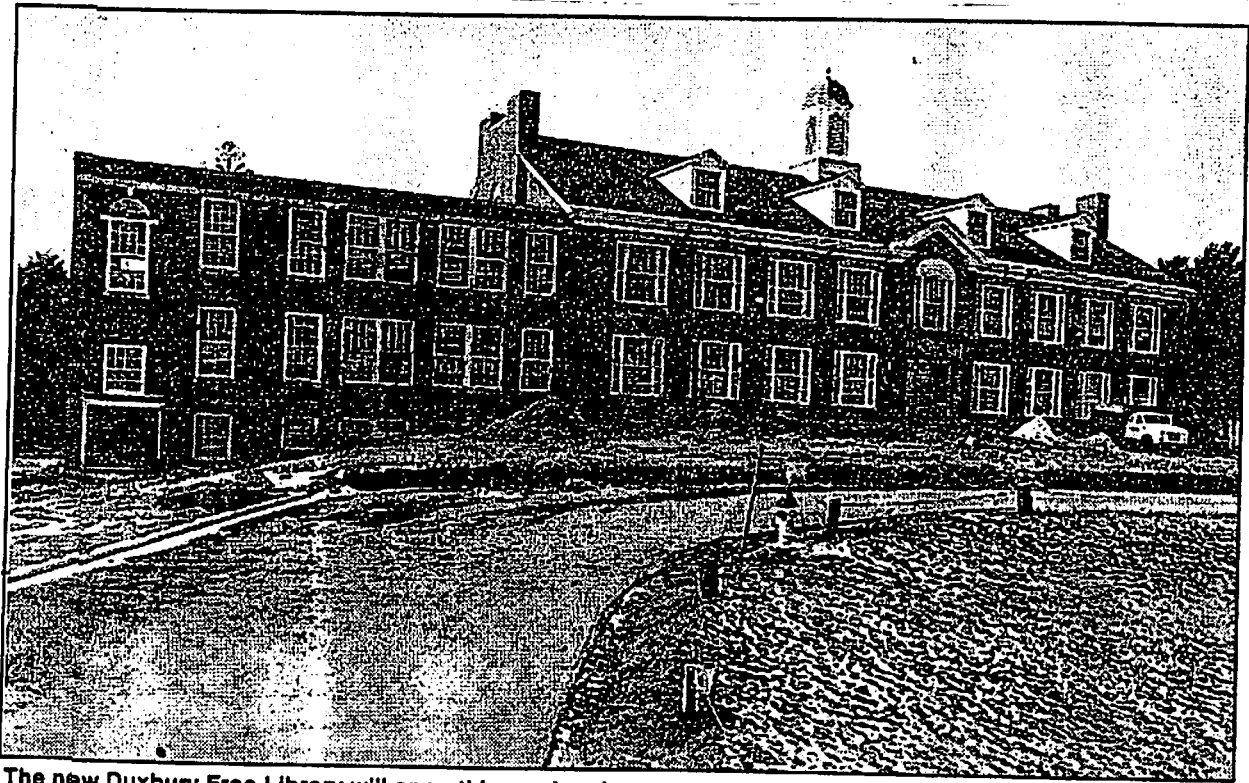


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# Commentary

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The new Duxbury Free Library will open this weekend.

Duxbury's virtues  
well exceed  
the town's vices

**T**en years ago, as Duxbury was celebrating the 350th anniversary of its founding, the town was obliged to question its fundamental values. A succession of fatal automobile accidents involving teenagers and alcohol in 1985 and 1986 had brought critical media attention under the most painful circumstances. "Can an entire community be deemed alcoholic?" marauding satellite-truck journalists asked on their live shots. Townspeople wondered too.

"When sorrows come," King Claudius noted in *Hamlet*, "they come not single spies but in battalions." So it often seems. But not necessarily out of cause and effect, and where alcohol is involved I am inclined to believe the non-Shakespearean doggerel: "it's the same disease whether you're from Yale or jail." Scratch the surface of any community or social class and you will find the signs of western man's oldest addiction.

## D. A. Mittell, Jr.



Patriot  
Ledger  
columnist

In Duxbury's case the opening of the Standish House, a summer hotel, in July 1871 inaugurated a century in which summer vacationers were an important part of the town's life. Among these the "cocktail par-

ty" became a tradition. But I think that was due to the fact that they were off-duty, not that they consumed more liquor per capita than the average American.

Nevertheless, the tragedies of the middle '80s led to sincere self-examination and a great effort to ensure that the young were not sent messages that underage drinking, or excessive drinking at any age, would be winked at as rights of passage. Now each year, selectmen declare high school prom weekend to be an "alcohol-free weekend" in which everyone in town is asked to abstain. There's perhaps a touch of zealotry in that, but the sentiment and mental message imparted are the right ones.

Comprehending cause and effect eludes mortal man, but the fact deserves to be recorded — since, sadly, it isn't likely to be recorded by the satellite truck crowd — that the 1990s have been far happier for Duxbury than the 1980s were. It's a fitting time to make that point: This weekend the Duxbury Free Library opens in its new home in the completely renovated 1927 high school after 11 years of persistent effort by the library's friends.

Planning for this day began in 1986 with consideration of several proposals to expand the 1909 library — a lovely but obsolete building given to the town by the Wright family in memory of George, their deceased son. (At the request of George's mother the town renamed the street in front of the library "St. George Street.") In the recession year of 1993, after seven years of give and take, town meeting rejected spending \$5.5 million to move the library into the empty former high school.

Friends of the library were distraught, but rather than give up they crafted a possibly unique public-private partnership including a \$200,000 federal grant, a \$2.1 million state grant and \$1.3 million in private donations. In 1995 town meeting approved the town's commensurately reduced \$3 million contribution by 564 votes,

leading to this weekend's celebration. The entrepreneurial spirit behind the new library was Deborah Bornheimer, who is both president of the library trustees and was project manager for the town. For years she led the forces that wouldn't say die; throughout 1997 she could be seen on site in a hard hat mingling amiably with architects and construction workers. Succinctly: She didn't do it alone but she was unquestionably the leader.

Nor is the new library Duxbury's only good news

- When the Holy Family Church moved to a new home, a grant from the Ellison Foundation — funded by the town's leading beneficent family since the Wrights — helped put the Ellison Center for the Arts into what had been the town's first Catholic church. The center now houses the Hingham-based South Shore Conservatory of Music and serves the region.

- Fund raising is under way to create the non-profit Duxbury Bay Maritime School, which will take over a former boat yard, beautify the harbor and, like the Ellison Center, serve the region. The property owner, Jack Davis, has forgone more profitable development schemes in order to work with the school.

- Every September hundreds of over-dressed townspeople gather under tent in the parking lot of the new Holy Family Church to raise money for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, which sends seriously ill children on trips of their dreams. The Duxbury event is now one of the foundation's biggest annual fund raisers.

- Nearly every year the high school's basketball, football, hockey and soccer teams compete for state and divisional championships against bigger schools. One must hope this is an indication that underage drinking is in some measure under control.

- Projects such as the new library, the Ellison Center and the Maritime School partly reflect the fact that the town has generous people who can afford to be generous: "It's nice to have money," it could be said. But one item in the local news reflects a generosity that can't be bought. When Brittany Lambert, a then 10-year-old girl, was diagnosed with a rare blood disease requiring a bone marrow transplant, hundreds gave blood samples to find out if they could be the donor. (A donor was found, but Brittany, now 12, needs a second transplant. The original donor has agreed to do it again.)

So it goes, but I do think that stereotypes about Duxbury persist, as they do about many communities. In Duxbury's case, people still think of it as primarily Protestant and "Yankee." The truth is: Catholic is now the largest religious denomination, there is an active synagogue, and until recently an Arab served on the board of selectmen.

Is there a cloud to these silver linings? If there is it might be this: At least three times in the 1990s, venerable homes have been sold at good prices only to be immediately demolished. To the buyers the lots themselves were more valuable than the houses. One was a lovely Victorian-era summer home overlooking Kingston Bay, another an historic Greek Revival farmhouse dating to the 1840s.

These demolitions were losses to the town, but what they portend is something every south-of-Boston community needs to prepare for: unprecedented pressure on land, which drives up the cost of housing and threatens open space.